

## Presentation to the Special Committee on Electoral Reform

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Thank you very much for this opportunity. My name is Christopher Majka and I'm the director of Democracy: Vox Populi, an advocacy group concerned with democratic and electoral issues. I have also had a long involvement with groups such as Fair Vote Canada, Fair Vote Nova Scotia, and Project Democracy, all organizations concerned with electoral and political reform.

I'd like to begin by saying that electoral reform is critically important for the future of Canadian democracy. The idea that citizens should determine the governance of a country was a radical one that originated in the sixth century BC in Athens. Over two and a half millennia it spread throughout much of the world, and as it dispersed it evolved. In Athens only land-owning men who were over 20 and were not slaves were permitted to vote.

In Canada the secret ballot was introduced in 1874 and women were enfranchised in 1918. There were once voting restrictions related to wealth, religion, race, and ethnicity in Canada. All these have now been eliminated and we recognize they are incompatible with an inclusive, egalitarian, and fair society. One important obstacle that *does* remain is the first-past-the-post electoral system.

It's understandable how it came into being. From 1867 to 1920 there were effectively only two political parties the Conservatives and Liberals. [Except for the very first election in 1867 when the Anti-Confederates, lead by Nova Scotia Premier and later Lieutenant Governor, Joseph Howe, briefly formed a separate block in Parliament]. In a two-party polity, first-past-the-post produces acceptably democratic outcomes, and over the first third of our country's existence this was how things were done.

However, in 1921 the Progressive and United Farmer's parties came into being, and since then – almost a century – there has never been a period when less than three – and frequently four or five – political parties have been represented in Parliament. The proliferation of parties characterizes the evolution of democracy in the 20th and 21st centuries and is a positive development that we need to attune our electoral system to.

It doesn't require great mathematical acumen to understand why first-past-the-post begins to break down when there are more than two parties. The greater the number, the more unrepresentative are electoral outcomes as a result of "splits" in the vote. Because outcome is determined exclusively by which party's candidate is first, *de facto* every vote cast for every candidate other than the runner-up amounts to a vote for the winner. This leads to highly unrepresentative results in which the spectrum of elected candidates can depart dramatically from levels of support in the country. Thus, parties that have significant support, but rank numerically second in many ridings, have a much diminished chance of parliamentary representation. And parties

ranked third or fourth – even though this may include hundreds of thousands of Canadians – have only a miniscule chance of representation.

This is problematic for the democratic health of a country. First of all, on first principles, we ought to strive for a Parliament that fairly represents the spectrum of political belief in our country. Secondly, with a plurality of parties on the political field, outcomes under first-past-the-post give rise to the view that many ballots are "wasted" – that these political convictions result in no meaningful democratic expression. Such voters feel disenfranchised by the system. This, not unreasonably, gives rise to political cynicism, never good for the political health of a country, and nowhere more so than amongst young voters.

In Canada, voter turnout has been diminishing for the past half century from almost 80 per cent between 1958 and 1963, to 58.8 per cent in 2008, before rebounding to 68.5 per cent in 2015. Elections Canada has only tracked youth turnout since the year 2000, but over that time turnout- for the 18–24 age demographic has averaged 44.1 per cent, whereas overall turnout averaged 62.5 per cent, i.e., almost a third lower. I'm not suggesting that first-past-the-post is entirely responsible for declining turnout, but there is evidence that unrepresentative outcomes contribute to an alienation from electoral participation and political engagement.

Canada has not been alone in this regard and many mature, stable democracies in the developed world have adopted better electoral systems. Indeed, in the developed world, only Canada, Great Britain, and the United States continue to employ first-past-the-post. Elsewhere systems of proportional representation are employed: at last count in 94 countries. Voters in all these jurisdictions have been able to understand and employ PR and there is no reason to suppose that Canadians would any less adept.

There are a number of different approaches to proportional representation, from party lists, mixed-member (MMP), and single-transferable vote (STV) systems, and there are variations in how these are implemented. There is a large discourse around their respective advantages, however, I'm not going to encumber you with a pitch for one or other, since in my view the most salient issue is that we implement proportional representation and not, for example, a ranked ballot system. In my view electoral systems that are based on pure proportionality, for example those in Israel or Italy, would not be suitable in a Canadian context.

It is important to set a threshold for parliamentary representation – 5 per cent is frequently used, although in some jurisdictions it ranges down to 2 or 3 per cent. It is democratically defensible to posit that a political inclination does have to meet a minimum threshold of acceptance before it is given representation in the forum that determines the direction of the country.

In my view, maintaining a geographical connection between elected representatives and the electorate is also desirable. It assist voters in feeling connected to "their" parliamentarians and is useful, both for constituency work, and in terms of

geographically-linked community expression – something important in as large and culturally diverse a nation as Canada. These objectives can be readily achieved by various implementations of MMP, STV and Party List approaches.

It's also worth underscoring that although electoral reform is not a panacea for all political problems, it can play an important role in contributing to a more productive political climate. With minority or coalition governments a frequent outcome with proportional representation, there is the necessity for political parties to work together. With several parties round the table, everyone has a stake in reaching a mutually acceptable solution. With representatives of multiple parties involved in decision-making, there is a sense of "ownership" of the decision, even if every party did not achieve all that was desired. Simply put, this results in better governance and an easier path of public acceptance of government decisions.

With respect to ranked ballot systems (a.k.a, preferential ballots, alternative vote, or instant runoff voting), which are used for federal elections only in Australia and Papua New Guinea (and for presidential elections in Ireland), this approach produces more representative results than first-past-the-post in non-partisan contexts, for example, in municipal elections or in intra-party elections to select leaders where second and third choices of trailing contenders who are eliminated can be factored into the choices for leading candidates. Thus, the candidate who "wins" has the strongest support overall, and not just of the fraction that selected them first. It is, however, a winner-take-all, majoritarian approach that, while suitable for selecting a single position, is completely unsuitable for selecting a representative body and does nothing to address proportional inequalities.

In my view, a referendum on this question is not required. The federal Liberal Party campaigned explicitly and prominently on a platform of electoral reform. We need to get on with it. It is easy to conjecture all manner of difficulties with regard to a new approach to voting (the vast majority of which prove to be red herrings) and the *status quo* always exerts an inertial pull.

What might be useful to consider would be a referendum some time *after* electoral reform to gauge public satisfaction. For instance, in New Zealand the previous first-past-the-post system was replaced by an MMP one in 1996. In 2011, after 15 years and six elections, New Zealanders were asked if they favored MMP or wished to change to another system (i.e., return to FPTP or one of three other potential options). From an informed perspective, and by a margin of 57.8 percent in favour, they chose to continue with MMP.

For all of the above reasons, our choice in Canada should be clear. For a vibrant democracy and representative fairness we require the implementation of a system of proportional representation.